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ABSTRACT

This study examined the experiences of 15 elementary schools in Washington state demonstrating relatively slow improvement on the reading and mathematics sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Since the passage of educational reform legislation in 1993, Washington has undertaken a systematic overhaul of its K-12 public school system, but some schools have not progressed as fast as others. The main source of data was a telephone interview with the school principal or a veteran classroom teacher (if the principal was new) at each school. Focus groups were held at a few of the schools. The study showed that schools that struggle to improve do not all struggle with the same barriers, nor do they approach school improvement in the same manner. The majority of the slow-moving schools were not effective at mounting an effective and integrated strategy of improvement. Instead, they adopted reform strategies in a slow and piecemeal fashion without the urgency and comprehensiveness that characterized their fast-improving counterparts. Schools were often limited by changes in leadership, weak leadership, a dysfunctional school culture characterized by staff resistance to change, and a slow consensus decision-making process that delayed the adoption of reform strategies. External forces also played a hand in the slow improvement of these schools. These forces included weak district accountability, weak district guidance, and inadequate resources or strategy. Teachers and school leaders identified other barriers to improvement and suggested assistance that would help overcome these barriers. Study findings also show that district- or parent-driven mechanisms for ensuring improved student performance are weak or nonexistent in most cases, and that state-imposed accountability is necessary to create real pressure for some Washington schools to improve. An appendix discusses study methodology. (Contains 23 references.) (SLD)

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Making Standards Work 2001

Washington Elementary Schools on the Slow Track Under Standards-Based Reform

Maria S. McCarthy

October 2001

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center on reinventing public education

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executive summary

Starting with the passage of the1993 Education Reform Act, Washington State has undertaken a systemic overhaul of its K-12 public school system. Since 1997, two main components of that reform, the adoption of academic standards and the development of standards-aligned assessments, have been in place at the 4th grade level. After four years of elementary school testing, some schools have shown marked improvement in the percentage of their students meeting the standards, while others have only inched along. Inconsistent improvement in student academic performance across similar schools has raised concern among Washington parents and policymakers, since mastering challenging educational standards is increasingly essential for students' future education and employment success. As the State draws closer to holding schools accountable for their students' academic achievement, it becomes increasingly important to understand the experiences of schools that struggle to demonstrate improvement.

This study examined the experiences of fifteen elementary schools in Washington demonstrating relatively slow improvement on the reading and math sections of the Washington Assessment of Student Learning. Our study revealed that schools that struggle to improve do not all struggle with the same barriers, nor do they approach school improvement in the same manner. However, several key, recurring factors might help explain the slow pace of improvement at most of the study schools. Compared to fast-improving schools depicted in our previous studies, the vast majority of slow-improving schools were ineffective at mounting an effective and integrated strategy of improvement. Instead, they adopted reform strategies in a slow and piecemeal fashion, without the urgency and comprehensiveness that characterized their fast-improving counterparts.

Factors within and outside the schools lay at the root of this slow process of strategic reform. Internally, schools were often limited by recent changes in leadership, weak leadership, a dysfunctional school culture characterized by staff resistance to change, and a slow consensus decision-making process that delayed the adoption of reform strategies. External forces also seemed to play a hand in the slow improvement of these schools. They included weak district accountability for school improvement (especially in rural schools), weak district guidance and capacity to help schools improve, and inadequate resources or strategy to meet the needs of ESL students.

Teachers and leaders in many schools also noted other barriers to improvement and suggested assistance that would help alleviate those barriers. Their suggestions included changes to the format and enhancement of the time available for professional development; more substitute teachers to allow permanent teachers more time for professional development; better dissemination of best practices for working with ESL students; and the establishment of more high-quality professional development programs in writing instruction. Respondents also portrayed a mixed record of state assistance in helping them meet the state reform expectations.

Considerable debate surrounds the dilemma of what is to be done with consistently low-performing schools. The study revealed that district- or parent-driven mechanisms for ensuring improved student performance are weak or nonexistent in most cases, and State-imposed accountability is necessary to create real pressure for some Washington schools to improve. The profiles of many schools in our sample point to the likelihood that, if buttressed by pressure to demonstrate improvement in a limited time, targeted assistance to help struggling schools

could enhance student learning. The type of assistance would need to be tailored to the identified needs of the school and might take the form of nstructional coaching to promote effective practice and reinforce professional development, or guidance from an external consultant on diagnosing school weaknesses, building a strategic plan, and reallocating district and school resources to target areas of need.

However, the study findings also illustrated that some schools are highly resistant to change and have deeply ingrained habits of teacher individualism and lack of mutual engagement. It is possible that such schools might be responsive to new leadership and targeted assistance alone. One must, however, ask whether these schools need stronger medicine to address dysfunctional adult relationships in the school, and whether they should be considered possible candidates for reconstitution with wholly new staff, trained together to provide coherent instructional programs.

Since many schools struggled with weak school and district leadership, it may be appropriate for the State School Board, the higher education community, and education foundations to explore the issue of school leadership more closely. Specifically, the finding calls into question whether it is most effective to have a single principal assume the varied roles of instructional leadership, budgetary and operations management, and strategic planning. It also suggests the need to reexamine the adequacy of existing training programs for principals, superintendents, and school board members. Lastly, the commonly voiced frustration over the challenge of getting ESL students to reach standards emphasizes the need for better guidance, dissemination of best practices, and in some cases enhanced resources to help schools serving English-language learners.

The report also identifies district and school level policy and operational changes that would help foster positive school reform. At the district level, the findings suggest that superintendents and school boards must provide adequate support and guidance to school leaders to help them spearhead comprehensive reform and adequate leverage so that they can overcome regulatory barriers that thwart change. District leadership must also keep watch over the development and implementation of school reform and be willing to intervene when the reform process has stagnated. Furthermore, district leadership must be open to reconfiguring time for instruction and professional development and to reevaluating teaching contracts that prohibit principals from removing teachers who will not engage in school-wide reform. At the school level, other important changes are needed to help schools reach higher learning goals. For one, schools need to integrate reform strategies so that they address all the interconnecting areas that stand in the way of student learning. Furthermore, teachers and administrators must recognize and overcome anti-change attitudes that poison school culture and cripple improvement strategies that aim to serve students better. Lastly, teachers and principals must take care to use consensus-building to advance reform, not get mired in the process.

introduction

Like almost all states throughout the nation, Washington has engaged in a major reform of its K-12 education system in the last seven years. To address growing concern over poor student learning outcomes in Washington's public schools, the State passed the Education Reform Act in 1993 that mandated a three-pronged reform process, commonly known as standards-based reform. The three prongs include the establishment of challenging academic learning standards for all students; the development of mandatory assessments that align with those standards; and the establishment of an accountability plan to hold schools and districts responsible for standards-based student learning.

With each passing year, schools across Washington feel increasing pressure to show improvement in the academic performance of their students. While the reform goals are clear, the path to get there rarely is. To better target their efforts, educators, school leaders, and district administrators need to better understand what factors can impede the student academic progress that all schools desire. Comparing the reform strategies of schools that struggle to improve with those of fast-improving schools can also help identify meaningful differences in approach and school culture that may explain why some school improvement plans leave little positive imprint on student learning.

With the state-endorsed academic standards and assessments in place, Washington State policymakers must still craft the terms of the state's accountability plan, the third component of the education reform strategy. Most importantly, they must determine the appropriate steps the State should take to assist and intervene in low-performing schools. In formulating this plan, policymakers too would benefit from greater insight into the experiences of schools that struggle to improve. Understanding the complexity of school reform in practice could help them avoid adopting a one-size-fits-all approach that may not address varied school needs or a plan that simply throws money at a school that has not developed a strategy for how to use it. Moreover, much of the debate around accountability is over how long to continue trying to turn around consistently low-performing schools. This study will not resolve that question but it will illuminate the issue and show how deeply rooted the internal problems are in some schools. In so doing, it will raise the question of whether school rehabilitation can occur at a reasonable pace in such schools without serious intervention.

This study attempts to shed light on why some elementary schools in Washington are struggling to show improvement in student performance with an aim to:

- inform the policy debate around education accountability in Washington State;
- help districts, schools, and educators recognize and understand barriers to school improvement; and
- identify school, district, and state level actions that can help overcome those barriers and help all children meet high standards of learning.

Section 1 provides a summary of the recent history of the education reform movement in Washington State. **Section 2** presents an overview of prior research that investigated the causes and underlying factors associated with both high and low school performance; **Section 3** presents the methodology used in the current study; **Section 4** presents an overview and analysis of the study findings; Finally, **Section 5** examines the lessons learned from this study and recommends policy and operational changes at the school, district, and state levels that can help ensure that all students in WA reach a high level of academic achievement.

section one:
education reform in washington state

In 1993, Washington State passed groundbreaking legislation that promised to substantially change the future of public education in Washington. The Education Reform Act called for the implementation of standards-based reform, which aimed to raise the academic expectations set for Washington students, to measure their achievement of those expectations, and to hold districts and schools accountable for student attainment of those learning goals. The first two elements of this reform, the adoption of the Essential Academic Learning Standards (EALRs) and the creation of the standards-aligned Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), have been implemented at the 4th, 7th, and 10th grade levels in the areas of math, reading, writing, and listening. September 2000 marked the release of the results from the fourth round of the 4th grade Washington Assessment of Student Learning. 1

In the past two years, the state has begun to seriously develop the third and final element of this reform, the accountability component. In 1999, Governor Locke appointed a 7-member commission to oversee the development of a plan to hold schools and districts accountable for student learning. Dubbed the Academic Achievement and Accountability Commission (known as the A-Plus Commission), the group set out to establish criteria for identifying high performing and low performing schools. Beyond simply identifying struggling schools, the Commission was charged by law with the responsibility for developing recommendations for providing assistance to and intervening in low performing schools. After a year 's intensive exploration and deliberation, the A-Plus Commission submitted its recommendations to the State Legislature in November 2000 (Shaw, 2000).

Although the fate of the Commission 's accountability recommendations currently hangs in the balance, it is unlikely that an accountability plan will be adopted this year. During the 2001 legislative session, both a House and Senate version of an education accountability bill were introduced and debated and resulted in the passage of two incompatible accountability bills. The two bills mainly diverge on the form and pace of the State 's assistance and intervention in schools not meeting performance targets (Ammons, 2001). The Senate bill provides more time for local districts to make improvements before the state can intervene. Additionally, the Senate version grants the teachers union considerable power in rejecting state-endorsed school reform plans in these schools. Governor Locke promised to veto the Senate 's version because he considered it an excessively patient approach to meeting the needs of students in chronically low-performing schools (Shaw, 2001).

Although a formal accountability plan has not yet been put into place, several state and district initiatives have already placed a priority on the improvement of WASL scores. Since 1997, the State legislature and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) have kept a close eye on schools' aggregate WASL performance and have created explicit expectations for improvement from all schools. Specifically, in 1998, the legislature mandated that school districts set goals for improvement that encompassed, at minimum, a 25% reduction in students not meeting the 4th grade reading standard by 2001.

Recent updates on the implementation of education reform in Washington have been mixed. On the plus side, every year since the WASL adoption, the State Superintendent of Public Instruction has reported successive increases in average WASL performance across the state. In fact, over two-thirds of Washington elementary schools had already met or exceeded their 2001

Reading Improvement goals by Spring 2000 (A-Plus Commission, 2000). Additionally, studies by the University of Washington on fast improving schools have highlighted that even schools with primarily at-risk students have substantially increased the proportion of their students meeting challenging academic standards. However, all the news is not so good. On the Spring 2000 assessment, 75% of Washington 4th grade students still could not demonstrate proficiency in all four WASL-tested subject areas (Ervin, 2000). Furthermore, despite overall improvements in aggregate performance, the media frenzy around each September 's WASL score postings highlights the relatively poor performance of some schools while other schools are glorified for fast improvement.

While the attention devoted to year-to-year score changes can be excessive, the disparity in improvement rates over four years of WASL testing raises the question of what is happening in slow- and fast-improving schools that might explain this uneven trend. Our center 's previous studies attempted to shed light on the characteristics of Washington elementary schools that have made remarkably strong improvement (Lake, et al, 2000, Lake, et al, 1999.) This study attempts to provide insight into the workings of schools at the other end of the spectrum: elementary schools that have made little improvement on their WASL scores between the first and latest year of testing. For the remainder of this report, these schools will be referred to as "slow-improving."

(Footnotes)
1 About 100 of approximately 850 elementary schools opted not to participate in the 1997 pilot administration of the WASL. Only beginning in 1998 was the WASL administration mandatory for all WA public elementary schools.

section two:
prior research

Research abounds on the strategies, cultures, and characteristics of exceptionally fast improving and high-achieving schools. Indeed, in the past two years our Center investigated the experiences of fast-improving schools in Washington to uncover common strategies and approaches to improvement that might help explain their success, despite challenging student demographics. These studies and a complementary body of research on "effective schools" (Edmonds, 1979; Walberg, et al, 1989; Coyle and Witcher, 1992; Thacker and McInerney, 1992; Glidden, 1999) point to the following attributes shared by schools demonstrating progress on student outcomes: 1) strong leadership; 2) an integration of structural and instructional changes toward an academically oriented school mission; 3) shared principal and teacher understanding of their student learning goal and a climate of high expectations for all students; 4) shared involvement in decision-making and a collaborative and team-oriented approach to reform; and 5) a safe and orderly school environment. Principals at these schools commonly use data to identify instructional weaknesses and prioritize professional development opportunities that address established needs; they show recognition for and reinforce positive change behaviors to maintain momentum for improvement; and they establish clear goals, monitor progress toward goals, and intervene when staff and administrator behavior does not reflect stated goals.

The research also shows some links between the involvement of district forces and the success of school improvement efforts. Effective schools often receive strong support and cooperation from the district superintendent and central office. Specifically, the schools benefit from district respect for school autonomy and school-site management and recognition that school-level experimentation, restructuring and collaboration can be essential to promoting optimal learning for their students. (Coyle and Witcher, 1992) Our Center 's previous studies of fast-improving schools, however, found varying district responses to improving schools. Some established a directive style that imposed a curricular and professional development improvement plan on all district schools. Others allowed schools autonomy from district mandates if they had a strong alternative plan of improvement. (Lake, et al, 2000). Overall, no uniform model of district involvement characterized Washington elementary schools that improved quickly on the WASL assessments.

While far less research literature exists on schools that are low-performing, some past studies have focused on schools that were unsuccessful at implementing reform or improving student learning. These studies suggest that schools that struggle to reform have the opposite characteristics of the aforementioned effective schools. That is, they often have poor leadership, lack focus and coherency in their strategies for improvement, and fail to create an appropriate sense of urgency that business-as-usual cannot continue. Poor leadership can manifest itself in the form of unclear plans and vision for improving instruction, in an inability to generate buy-in for school improvement objectives, and in a failure to ensure that agreed-upon changes become institutionalized (Bryk, et al, 1998; Deal and Peterson, 1998).

Some research also finds that a dysfunctional and "toxic" culture often lies at the root of the problem. In these schools, teacher factions often develop, with one group united in resistance to change, to the principal, or to other staff cohorts. Researchers also characterize the toxic environment as one marked by low expectations for student learning, a lack of consistency in the enforcement of student and teacher

behavior standards, and the existence of entrenched "negaholics," or staff who perpetually indulge in complaint and resurrect the school's negative stories of old (Deal and Peterson, 1998).

This body of research and complementary research on organizational reform in the business sector also assert that an organization trying to reverse its stagnation must be able to remove obstacles thwarting positive change. For instance, after the majority of a school or organization 's staff and leadership have committed to a plan of improvement, researchers find that lasting change hinges on the removal of saboteurs or other entrenched barriers to change that threaten to undermine the reform. Additionally, they contend that the institutionalization of reform requires consistent reaffirmation of the need to improve, recognition of successes, and the constructive and regular use of student performance data to inform instruction (Deal and Peterson, 1998; Kotter, 1995).

Although we know something about non-improving schools in general, little research to date has focused on the factors underlying stagnant school performance within the context of Washington 's standards-based reform. However, a recent study by Seattle Pacific University examined barriers to achieving education reform in Washington State and their findings echoed those of previous research. In their study, principals from high-achieving schools hypothesized that low-performing elementary schools in Washington suffered from 1) a lack of skilled leaders with a strategic vision; 2) a lack of time and funding for teacher training; 3) teacher reluctance to change; 4) a school climate characterized by high poverty and student and staff mobility; and 5) an exhausting and frustrating pace of reform that requires massive change in a short time. Of these five main impediments, principals singled out a lack of leadership and vision as the main obstacle to school reform taking hold in Washington elementary schools. (Fouts, et al, 2000).

While providing a valuable base from which to start, the Fouts study supplied only hypotheses about school performance from principals outside the schools in question. This study seeks to take a step closer and to examine barriers to school improvement from the perspective of the struggling schools themselves.

section three:
methodology

Sample Selection Process
This study explored data gathered from in-depth interviews with principals or senior teachers at fifteen elementary schools in Washington.1 Schools chosen had demonstrated relatively little improvement on their Math and Reading WASL scores between 1997 and 2000. Sample selection followed these principles:

1) Choose schools based on rates of improvement over time, NOT absolute scores.
2) Compare a school's rate of improvement to that of other schools like it (with similar baseline scores), NOT to all other schools.
All elementary schools were grouped into four incremental categories based on their 1997 WASL scores, ranging from 0 to 65 percent meeting standard. Then, within each category, schools were selected based on their relative improvement, not on their final score. This process ensured that schools with high, medium, and low starting scores could be considered for the study, not simply schools with low scores.
3) Choose schools that showed the lowest rates of improvement in BOTH Math and Reading within their baseline category.
1) Seek a sample with wide geographic and socioeconomic distribution.

It is important to keep in mind that within each category of schools, the average rate of score improvement was often substantial. Therefore, even if a sample school improved far more slowly than the average within its group, that does not mean it showed no improvement or posted low final scores. For example, within the lowest baseline category for reading, average WASL score improvement between 1997 and 2000 was 187%. To be considered for our sample, a school with a similarly low baseline score in 1997 had to show less than 57% improvement, a less dramatic but certainly not insignificant rate of improvement.
(For a more complete explanation of the selection process, please refer to Appendix A, Methodology.)

The Sample
The resulting sample of schools included:
§ Rural and urban schools
§ Schools representing many counties across the state
§ Schools of various sizes
§ Schools ranging widely in their percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL)
§ Schools ranging widely in their ethnic and racial composition

Research Questions
Findings from past research on both ineffective and effective schools helped frame the inquiry into slow-improving Washington elementary schools. Two intentions guided this research: first, to examine whether this sample of Washington schools with slow WASL improvement share the characteristics, cultures, and strategies portrayed in prior research about low-performing schools. Second, to investigate whether tangible differences exist between the sample of slow-improving elementary schools and the elementary schools cited for fast improvement in the 1999 and 2000 Making Standards Work and Making Standards Stick studies.
The current study therefore intended to answer the following questions:

§ What are the characteristics of Washington schools exhibiting comparatively slow improvement?
§ What type of school culture do they have?
§ What types of professional relationships exist within and outside them?
§ What strategies have they used to improve student learning?
§ What barriers thwart their improvement efforts?

§ How do they attempt to overcome barriers to improvement?
§ What external assistance do they receive to help realize improvement?
§ And do they as a group share similar experiences and barriers to improvement or do they show considerable variation?

The main data source was a telephone interview with the current school principal or a veteran classroom teacher, in cases where the current principal was too recently installed to provide adequate historical background. The confidential interviews, lasting between an hour and two hours in length, were conducted during March and April of 2001. In order to answer the research questions above, respondents answered questions about: 1) the school 's approach to improvement over the last 3-4 years; 2) the indicators the school used to diagnose needs and measure progress; 3) strategies s/he used to gain buy-in for improvement; 4) the culture of the school; 5) the relationships among teachers and between school and district administrators; 6) barriers to school improvement; and 6) types of district, state, or other assistance that might help the school make improvement. (Appendix B contains the protocol used in these interviews.)

In a few schools, focus groups with a group of 6-8 certificated teachers supplemented the principal interviews in order to gain their perspective on the research themes. (Appendix C contains the protocol used to guide the focus groups.)

Limitations of the Study

This study provides valuable insight into the nature of a sample of slow-improving schools and the areas of improvement with which they struggle. However, given the limited scope of the research project and the unwillingness of many schools to participate, I cannot assume that my findings hold true for all slow-advancing schools in Washington. Furthermore, the factors that influence the performance of a school are complex and varied. A complete assessment of a school would require numerous hours of classroom observation, interviews with district administrators, school board members, and parents. The time and funding constraints of this study resulted in a more limited investigation into these schools and a more narrow range of perspectives.

(Footnotes)
1 Fifteen schools agreed to participate out of 31 schools contacted.

section four:
study findings

Section 4: Study Findings

This investigation into slow-improving schools revealed important findings about the nature of these schools and their approach to raising student achievement. Common characteristics emerged among the slow-improving schools, and at the same time, pronounced differences distinguished the sample of schools from fast-improving elementary schools depicted in our center 's recent studies. Most notably, the vast majority of slow-improving schools differed from fast-improving schools in their strategies for improvement and the urgency with which they approached improvement. That is, most slow-improving schools either had yet to adopt a strategy for improvement or had adopted a piecemeal array of reform tactics that lacked the integration and comprehensiveness that characterized those of fast-improving schools. (Some school leaders now claim to have created plausible improvement strategies, but did not do so before this year.) Furthermore, teachers and school leaders in most schools did not appear to approach the call for reform with the same urgency, priority, and can-do attitude of fast-improving schools.

Reasons for the slow-adoption of reform strategies or their lack of integration varied across schools. In some cases, ineffective and discontinuous leadership or a dysfunctional culture of blame and distrust lay at the root of the problem. In other cases, despite shared trust and commitment among teachers and leadership, schools became mired in slow-developing consensus processes that delayed change. The challenges of serving a growing population of limited-English speaking students also overwhelmed some schools, because they lacked specialized resources to accommodate their needs or failed to develop an appropriate school or district strategy to overcome the challenges. Lastly, school performance suffered in some cases from minimal district attention paid to school improvement and limited district capacity to promote and guide improvement efforts.

Three of the sample schools did not fit the above characterizations of the other twelve schools. These schools appeared to have many of the attributes of fast-improving schools and defied diagnosis as to what explained their slow improvement. The characteristics of their school culture, staff attitudes toward change, and the integration of methods in their improvement strategy echoed the findings of fast-improving schools. However, these schools stood out in that their baseline WASL reading scores all fell within the highest category, while the starting scores of most of the other twelve schools fell into one of the lower three tiers. Further investigation would be necessary to detect subtler differences that might explain their slower improvement compared to schools with comparable starting scores. One might speculate that their strong academic performance generated only lukewarm support for real change from teachers or the principals who may resent the imposition of the standards and tests on their existing high caliber academic program. One might also consider that the schools ' basically solid approach to reform lacked the benefit of finetuning and revision.

The remainder of this findings discussion will focus only on the larger group of twelve schools that shared one or more attributes that seemed closely linked with their slow progress. The section will first explore the one universal finding for all of these schools: their slow and piecemeal adoption of effective strategies for improvement. Next, it will uncover recurring factors internal to the schools that may explain their slow pace of reform. Then it will highlight external district influences that seemed to bear on the progress of the sample schools. Lastly, it

will report on respondents ' perceptions of existing state assistance to help schools raise achievement and on their suggestions for other types of assistance that could help them be more successful.

Slow Pace of Reform

The overarching trend among the twelve sample schools was that they adopted strategies for improvement at a much slower pace and in a more piecemeal fashion than did fast-improving schools observed in studies. Their slower pace included a: 1) slow start-up period, 2) slow identification of improvement strategies, 3) slow and disintegrated implementation of chosen strategies. While this finding may seem obvious, it is important in that it lends credibility to the notion that the practical approach a school follows to make improvement can have a significant impact on the performance of students in that school.

In order to characterize the reform process as "slow," it is necessary to have a point of comparison. While the study did not include interviews with a fast-improving control group of schools, the Making Standards Work and Making Standards Stick studies provided a basis of comparison to principal responses in fast-improving schools. In comparing principals ' articulation of improvement strategies in the first two studies with the current study, the contrast is stark. Principals from our previous studies recognized the imperative of linking structural and instructional changes to produce comprehensive reform. Within the first year or two of standards-based reform, they adopted a culture of continuous and relentless improvement and they developed an interconnected array of the following strategies, all aimed at improving student learning:

1) instructional alignment with the EALRs and across grade levels,
2) more efficient use of time,
3) more collaborative and intentional staff development,
4) more strategic parent involvement,
5) more intentional staff evaluation,
6) relentless and on-going analysis of strengths and weaknesses, and
7) better targeted resources to help low-performing students.

While the respondents at most of this year 's study schools included one or more of these strategies in their approach to improvement, most schools seemed to adopt the strategies one by one, in a slow and disintegrated fashion. For instance, in many schools, just this year they adopted strategies, such as team planning and block scheduling, that were well underway in fast-improving schools during our first year of investigation. Sometimes it appeared that these schools took longer to recognize that an isolated, though important change strategy will have limited effect if not reinforced by other complementary ones. In other cases, considerable barriers prevented schools from enacting strategies they recognized as important.

What Factors Contribute to a Slow Pace of Reform?

While slow strategic reform was the common denominator in these schools, the factors contributing to the slow pace were not shared commonly by all. Analysis of the in-depth interviews and focus groups revealed seven recurring factors that might explain the slow improvement. Some of these factors reflected the research findings from previous studies. The first four factors are situated within the school and the remaining three pertain to external district forces at work in these schools.

Internal Factors

1) Upheavals in leadership
2) Weak leadership
3) Dysfunctional cultures, typified by a culture of resistance or distrust

4) Slow consensus decision-making process

External Factors
1) Weak rural district capacity to help schools reform
2) Inadequacy of resources or strategy to meet the needs of ESL students
3) Weak district accountability for school improvement

It is important to note that not all sample schools struggled with the same barriers or shared the same characteristics in their approach to reform. However, urban schools as a group and rural schools as a group shared commonalities in the barriers they faced, the dynamics of their cultures, and the types of assistance they need. This contextual dichotomy will be explored further in the following sections.

Internal Factors Behind Slow Pace of Reform
Internal factors frequently contributed to slow progress in our sample schools. They include unstable leadership, weak leadership, dysfunctional cultures, and a slow process of consensus-based decision-making.

1) Upheavals in Leadership
Eight of the fifteen schools interviewed had principals with tenure of less than two years and another principal had just three. In six of these cases, frequent leadership turnover characterized the schools, with an average of three to four principals in the last ten years and one extreme case of four principals in five years. In the remaining three cases, the recent change in leadership occurred after a retirement, district promotion, or isolated circumstance ended a period of leadership stability.

Among the schools marked by high leadership turnover, two districts had recently "counseled out" principals they found ineffective at making improvement in student performance. In these cases, the district removed the principal in the midst of a school year and either handpicked the replacement or brought in an interim principal to cover the period before hiring a new principal. In three other schools, teaching staff influenced the recent principal departures. Two respondents attributed the resignation to the former principal 's frustration with entrenched staff interests that blocked reform efforts in the school. In fact, both respondents predicted their own imminent departure based on the same frustrations. In another school, staff united against a recently hired principal because they felt the principal exercised poor leadership, held staff and students to inconsistent standards, and lacked the capacity to handle the various demands of the position.

Prior leadership changes that predated the most recent upheaval happened for various reasons. In some cases, interim principals filled a gap for a year or more between principals. In others, retirements or relocations to another district or state accounted for the change. Lastly, it appeared that in some schools previous principals resigned after two or three years, but respondents did not have adequate information to explain what caused the departures.

Effects of Leadership Changes
Whatever the cause, changes in leadership almost always create disruption and require time for staff and administration to adjust to new relationships and establish new expectations and plans of action. Not surprisingly, the schools at the earliest stages of their reform process almost all had brand new leadership. With a few exceptions, most new principals said they did not maintain the previous principal 's approach to change, because it was either non-existent or very unfocused. For all intents and purposes, these schools have initiated viable improvement efforts only this school year.

The more often leadership change occurs, the more difficult the adjustment process becomes. For instance, teachers in one school with high principal turnover expressed frustration at the lack of continuity in leadership and the reinvention of improvement plans every two years. When coupled with simultaneous changes in district leadership and expectations for reform, the situation has left teachers defensive and resistant to committing to change ideas, because they doubt the principal and plan of reform will remain. As one teacher explained,

"Our school is starting to work on a unified strategy but we've had three different principals in four years. Each new principal starts fresh with a new set of ideas just to be replaced a year or two later with another one. It's not surprising that teachers want to just retreat into their classrooms and shut their doors because they're frustrated...Even when a new person does come in, they rarely provide good leadership. They 're just scrambling to try to do something. "

While this response from teachers may be understandable, it is important to distinguish leadership changes caused by various circumstances, including weak leadership, from those where successive changes appear to stem from a toxic staff culture that drives off leadership. Where prior weak leadership stymied school reform, new principal respondents all said they were determined to undo ineffective school norms and embraced their role as necessary agents of change. New principals who said their predecessors had been burdened by teacher resistance expressed little hope of leading a strong improvement effort.

2) Schools suffer from weak leadership

The slow progress of reform at about six schools seemed in large part rooted in weak leadership. In most but not all of these cases, the "ineffective leader" no longer remains at the school or other contextual factors have changed to allow for the expression of more effective leadership. Some or all of the following deficits characterized the weak leadership in these six schools:

§ lack of strategic vision for improving student learning;
§ unwillingness to spearhead meaningful reform;
§ inadequate attention paid to the institutionalization of reform initiatives.

Lack of strategic vision for improving student learning

Splintered reform initiatives demonstrating a lack of strategic vision were most apparent in cases where leadership had recently changed hands. Indeed, many new principals detected nothing but cosmetic changes left by their predecessors. There appeared to be no well-conceived initiatives in place to improve instruction, to prioritize and streamline professional development, or to use time and data more effectively, all strategies that previous studies have found are essential for making improvement. The following examples illustrate the fractured approach to change that characterized many schools prior to the arrival of the new principal.

"Before the different groups spent all of their time looking at test data, picking out little pieces and then trying to solve that problem using what they already did ...doing that for a couple of weeks, and then jumping to something else for the next couple of weeks, but never changing the way it was taught and never doing anything really well. "

Another new principal described the situation as such,

"When I arrived, I found the scattered approach. Too many things going on and most of the staff felt that way too. They

had grants and things going on that nobody knew what they did or why they were there. Most of them were great things but there wasn't any coordination. The programs were just add-on things - something else to do - they had no connection to what we were already doing."

Accounts from other new principals demonstrated how a lack of vision had allowed for the development of reform strategies that neglected to focus on teaching and learning. "Very little changed (in the past three to four years) because only this year we 've finally begun to talk about what the real problems are and about teaching and learning. For a long time, (the staff-led improvement committees) were all focused on climate and community issues and hadn 't really addressed student learning ... So, gradually in the last couple of years, we 've been getting more focused on student learning. This year we finally decided that 's what we need to focus on. That 's why we 're here."

Interestingly, in a few cases, teachers had tried to advance reform efforts in their schools despite little or no guidance from their principal. While their efforts led in one instance to the submission of a Reading Improvement Plan and in another to voluntary efforts to realign instruction to reflect the EALRs, they did not penetrate the whole school and a lack of guiding leadership kept the process from becoming fully collaborative.
"There wasn 't leadership going on here, and consequently, they 're a couple, three years at least behind making progress in reform. There are some new strategies that people are employing, but no real concerted effort. People were all working in isolation is the way that things have been. No real building focus. Very good teachers working in twenty different directions ...Teachers alone were the ones leading the charge and change."

Even with consistent leadership some schools took considerable time to clarify areas of need, to strategize about responses to those weaknesses, and to integrate both structural and instructional strategies to address those conditions. For instance, in the first years of WASL testing, many principals and staff analyzed WASL data to identify areas of instructional weakness and then began to review new curriculum materials that would encompass the required content areas. However, sometimes only this year, principals introduced compatible changes to professional development or restructured their teacher evaluation objectives to reflect explicit instructional goals.

In other cases where the reform approach lacked integration, instruction and student learning were eclipsed by strategies to target other school needs. For instance, inadequate parent involvement and excessive class size captured the school 's attention for the first years of reform, and the focus shifted to overhauling ineffective instructional practices only last year. One principal explained this process as follows,
"For the last three to four years, we 've had (committees) targeting areas that staff and the entire community identified needed improvement ...We tackled primarily family involvement, safety, and reduced class size because those were the areas people felt most strongly about ...In the last year or two, we 've switched our (committee) areas to be more academically based, targeting reading and writing in an effort to systematize our approach."

Interestingly, some principals remarked that while considerable time and effort were devoted to increasing parent involvement in the early years, approaching the issue in isolation proved far less effective than more recent strategies to integrate it with instruction and learning goals. This quote illus-

trates this evolution.
"The point being we found that we couldn 't just ask parents to come to meetings. We weren't that successful. In order to get our points across we evolved to where we included things where their kids were presenting the kinds of work they 're doing."

Unwillingness to spearhead meaningful reform

In one extreme case, weak leadership took the form of shirking all responsibility for leading reform. The current principal and teachers portrayed the outgoing retiring principal as having failed to respond to the challenges of education reform and reflected that he should have left sooner. Motivation for reform resided only in the school 's teachers who continued to receive a rubber stamp of approval from the principal during his mandatory evaluation visit to their classrooms. As the respondent explained,
"The principal was a sweet person. But, he was tired and ready to leave ...He would rather change the paper in the copy machine than come and observe teaching in the classroom."

Inadequate attention paid to the institutionalization of reform initiatives

Compared to fast-improving schools, principals at many slow-improving schools had paid little attention to the implementation of reform strategies at the classroom level. For instance, while almost all school strategies included changes to mathematics instruction, some study principals expressed regretfully that they had taken for granted that teachers would implement lessons from trainings and planning sessions. They discovered to their surprise that in some classrooms, reform had not taken hold as they had hoped. However, they generally responded to this pattern with frustration, rather than with the establishment of performance objectives for teachers or with more frequent classroom visits to ensure that commitment to reform amounted to more than lip service. The following quote provides an illustration of this leadership issue:
"My failing has been that I have not been clear enough and have not checked up enough and not been strong enough. What I should have done is - you show me where you are every two weeks - accountability. But I didn't want to put the fear of big brother is watching in them ....My mistake is over-estimating their understanding and what they were doing because I don 't try to breathe down their necks. I just assumed they did it."

Interestingly, teachers in focus groups also noted this lack of accountability as a barrier to the institutionalization of effective reform. In one case, teachers expressed frustration that some of their colleagues, despite making verbal commitments to change, persist in using their traditional approaches and outdated materials and yet go unchecked by the administration. As one teacher put it,
"There are some teachers who have the attitude that it 's their way or the highway. This district and the principals have been really lenient. They don 't come around and check what people are doing in the classroom. There 's no accountability for using the newly adopted curriculum. They do the mandatory two observations per year and beyond that no one knows what 's happening....I think that holds us back. We have so much flexibility. The only reinforcement we get is the sales people who come for in-service and just continue their sales job. The administration makes us feel like we're failing but they don 't want to face the teachers who aren 't using good practice. They couldn 't recognize good practice if they saw it."

3) Dysfunctional Cultures

Six of the schools interviewed took consider-

able time to adopt reform strategies because adult relationships within the school and district were wrought with distrust, frustration, and division or focused on negative values and resistance. In one instance, the school culture disintegrated over multiple years of distrust that developed between teaching staff and the principal. The respondent described the situation, which led to staff and principal complaints to the school board, as follows:

"The management style and the way (principal) related to the staff lost the respect of the staff. (Principal) would pick on certain people - usually the ones who didn't have any power. (Principal) would criticize them for something that someone else was doing too, but the other person has more power in the staff and so (principal) wouldn't say anything to them. People all of a sudden felt threatened. They weren't sure who (principal) would go after next."

In the other five schools, the principal described the current or past dysfunction as a culture of strong staff resistance to change. In three instances, recent teacher retirements, transfers to other schools, or the hiring of a new principal have lessened the resistance considerably, and principals attributed recent school reform progress to these changes. However, a few principals claimed that negative attitudes among senior teachers had influenced the departure decisions of some new, younger teachers who transferred to other schools with less hostility. Past research on the importance of teacher recruitment and selection to a school's effectiveness identifies that culture and faculty dynamics can have a profound influence on a school's ability to recruit good teachers (Spuck, 1974, cited in Rosenholtz, 1985).

Interestingly, the loudest and most unreserved complaints about staff resistance emerged from schools in which teachers also expressed frustration over weak school leadership, disdain for district leaders as "people who couldn't make it in the classroom", and exasperation over the district's mixed messages and lack of support. In these cases, principals likewise expressed frustration over "micromanaging schoolboards" and superintendents with little vision and compunction to do things differently.

As complaints point in all directions, it is impossible to identify the root cause of the bad relationships nor lay blame on one party or another. The apparent overlap between weak school leadership and highly resistant staff raises the question of whether the two symptoms in fact represent only one problem, seen through two perspectives. Were weak leadership alone the issue behind a struggling school, changing the principal could likely solve the problem and generate positive change at the school. However, it may be possible that the appropriate diagnosis is rather a "sour school", whose culture succeeds in defeating successive leaders. Simply changing principals under those circumstances might be an irrelevant tool to combat a much deeper problem.

The challenging staff culture and dynamics some principals described included two common elements:

§ Distrust and resistance among veteran teachers to principal-led reform initiatives; and

§ Minimal commitment to education reform, a mentality that "this too shall pass", and disdain for the WASL assessment.

Distrust and Resistance among Veteran Teachers

Some principals cited resistance from veteran teachers to adopting EALR-driven changes to their curriculum or instructional practices, when those teachers had honed their teaching strategies and subject mastery

over years of practice. Principals also found that collaboration, team planning, and sharing of effective strategies generated considerable resistance from veteran teachers, since they have traditionally worked in isolation and teaching has long been a "cottage industry." Even in schools where on the surface, teacher relationships seemed close and collaborative, reluctance to approach instruction and planning as a collaborative endeavor prevailed. A principal from one school like this explained,

"I think there is a way of operating. We don't have much staff turnover. Some of these teachers were born in this town. They have never been anywhere else. They are very isolated and have no outside networking with anyone from other schools outside of here. They are good teachers and they are limited in scope, not in heart. Change comes very hard here. On the surface, they are very much- - we work together; we change; we're a team. It took me a long time to realize they are very independent players. It 's lots of hugs, but I can 't get any team teaching going on here. (The team emphasis) is about supporting each other and pretending they know what 's going on in each other 's classrooms. I set up time for them to work together and share their kids for math and work together on the new curriculum. And right now I have multiple classrooms where they all have the same math time, and they will not share their kids. They will not let go....Then it came out that they recognized the fact that the did not really trust each other."

In other cases, principals described a more direct level of hostility from veteran teachers with entrenched interests, old grudges, and a lot of power to resist change. While principals valued the skills and experience of their veteran master teachers, most principals found the influx of newer staff to be crucial to developing momentum for change and for adding optimism and energy to a sometimes soured staff.

"You've got old staff that have been here forever. They would rather not even have a principal and just keep things business as usual. They'd like to be their own separate school district and not tie into the other buildings and the direction the district is going. When I first came here, I could see they were a strong group of people; however, you could take the best team and if they're not all playing by the same rulebook you are going to lose every game out there on the court. That 's how it 's been...The former principal said he pitied me because to him this is the worst school in the state as far as people working together. "

Rosenholtz (1985) provides an overview of the research on the negative effects of a normative climate of teacher isolation. In schools where limited teacher contact with colleagues is the norm, teachers have little opportunity to develop shared notions about the content of their instruction, nor about how student progress should be measured. As a result, research has found that classroom instruction, goals, and indicators of success within individual classrooms develop in highly inconsistent ways and reflect individual beliefs about what should be learned (Bishop 1977, Lortie, 1975, and Tye and Tye, 1984, cited in Rosenholtz, 1985). The ultimate consequence of teacher isolation and teacher interaction devoid of professional content can be teacher disengagement, an acceptance of ineffective work with students, and the creation of a structure of social support and recognition that rewards acts of non-teaching more than instructional effectiveness (Levy, 1970 and Willower and Jones, 1963, cited in Rosenholtz, 1985). Additionally, the absence of conversation about instructional practices among colleagues limits the likelihood that student learning and achievement will emerge as the guiding purpose around

which a school focuses (Rosenholtz, 1985).

In a few schools, teacher resistance assumed a different form. Principals faced difficulty using resources more strategically because teachers refused to cede control of those resources and considered the move detrimental to their power.
"We got an outstanding new Title I specialist but the teachers wouldn't even let her work with kids outside the classroom. They actually used her as another aide ....a certificated person! She was ready to quit and that's been the history with these Title I specialists – when we get them in, they aren't allowed to do anything with the kids. The teachers want to use them as their aides."

In some cases, struggles over resource allocation and teacher expectations occurred with the teachers union more so than with an individual faction of teachers within the school.
For instance, district negotiations with the teachers union over the distribution of professional development funds rendered them ineffective as part of one school's reform plan.
"This year we had no money for in-services. We were to use (one pool of) money but that got held up in negotiations with our union ...The union wanted say on how the money was divided up between our classified union and certificated union. The district believed that it needed to be a site decision. So, we sat there for months while they hassled it out...The union only agreed to give it to the principals once we verbally agreed we would not dictate it ...So, the money went straight to the staff and so, if I see something that I want to send a person to, I personally have no budget to make it happen. I can tell the person that I think it would be good, but if they want to save their money for something else they can."

Minimal Commitment to State Education Reform and Disdain for WASL
Staunch teacher opposition to the WASL and the overall pace and tenor of school reform also emerged as a strong theme in this year's study, compared to previous studies of fast-improving Washington schools. By some principal accounts and in focus groups, teachers voiced unreserved resentment and lack of respect for the WASL assessment as a tool for measuring student performance and as a fundamental element of the State's reform initiative. In focus groups, teachers commonly disregarded the test as "not telling you anything about what a child is able to do." One teacher went so far as to write a song blasting the WASL as "a test so bad" and demonizing the government and business community who "...preach and preach and preach, Just let us teachers do our jobs 'cause we know what to teach." By contrast, teachers on the whole appreciated the state-defined Essential Academic Learning Standards upon which the WASL assessment is based and found them to be a sound reflection of their goals for student learning.

Complaints focused on three main aspects of WASL testing. First, many teachers considered meeting the WASL standard an unrealistic goal for the great majority of students at their schools, due to poverty, language barriers, and lack of parental support. As one teacher put it,
"The test might be realistic for an upper-middle class suburban kid with two well-educated parents at home, but it doesn't reflect what our kids can do. It's not a reasonable goal for kids who moved from Mexico three years ago, whose families live in poverty, and whose parents are just struggling to scrape by and don't care how their kids do academically."

Secondly, teachers and principals raised concerns about the developmental appropriateness of the math test, given its emphasis on multi-step problems. Teachers also found

the math WASL excessively language-rich and dependent on writing rather than computation. The necessity for strong language skills to master the math section, they argued, further penalized second-language students, already at a great disadvantage in the English-based assessment.

Lastly, teachers expressed frustration that the WASL tested subjects drew time away from other worthwhile content areas, particularly art and music, which was a concern also voiced by teachers in fast-improving schools. One principal, however, attributed this sentiment in the following way,
"I think in general their perception is that we're not able to have a lot of fun like we used to in the past. But you know, were kids really learning in the past?"

Another principal responded that standards and the WASL were frequent targets of staff complaint and that teachers explained away other comparable schools ' improvement as "teaching to the test."

4) Slow Process of Consensus Building
Principals also identified other internal factors associated with the slow pace of implementing plans for improvement. In multiple cases, respondents faulted an excessively consensus-oriented approach to change as a major impediment to having reform take hold and move forward. In other cases, while the principal did not label this tendency as a barrier, it seemed apparent that the highly consensus-oriented process slowed or impeded movement. While research on effective schools often cites collaboration and shared decision-making as factors in school success, the distinction between collaboration and decision-making burdened by the requirement to reach unanimous agreement on all things is often lost. Some principals attributed the strict adherence to consensus-based decision-making to teachers' distrust of one another and consequent reluctance to let anyone else represent them. Others portrayed the requirement for unanimity as a tactic to delay the adoption of unwanted reforms that would threaten the status quo. Still in other cases, the approach grew directly out of a whole-school reform model that emphasizes full staff involvement in making decisions affecting the school. One principal described the process as follows,
"Once the teachers in each content group make recommendations about improvement strategies, then we bring those recommendations to the larger committee. Then they can propose them to the entire school and we don't move forward until everyone says they can live with it."

Another remarked,
"There's a real culture of distrust here, so no one feels comfortable with representational leadership. All changes have to receive full staff consent or they don't happen...then when we adopted a new program, I thought we should gradually phase it in so it would not be as overwhelming, but the staff again insisted on doing it all together or not at all. What's happened is that it's clicked for some people and been too much of a drastic change for others and so they have abandoned it.
The State needs to quit saying we want grass roots consensus. If there are clear approaches the State wants, then let 's get on with it. Don't tell me I have to spend time and meetings ad nauseum so that we can end up adopting the state frameworks anyway, but just with everyone involved in the process."

One new principal expressed concern over the unbalanced emphasis on consensus decision-making that he perceived as the common approach exercised by most school principals and advocated by OSPI and state policymakers. He described the more directive approach he now uses as something that

needs to happen more often for change to occur.

"Principals need to be prepared to use a barrage of management tools to meet varied situations. When reform isn't happening, they must be prepared to take a more directive role to get things going and move beyond the collaborative approach. If you always wait for consensus, things don't always happen... I don't wait for everyone to agree on how we're going to use staff development funding. I come up with ideas and initiatives and then it's open for discussion, but I don't wait around for full consensus because it's just too slow."

External Factors Behind Slow Pace of Reform

Schools do not operate in isolation and thus, not surprisingly, district factors also played a large part in shaping school reform and most importantly, in providing assistance and creating leverage for overcoming barriers to improvement. Interestingly, the strength of external agents in facilitating reform varied significantly between urban and rural districts. This section will elaborate on three main factors that seemed to contribute to the slow pace of school reform in many schools: weak rural district capacity to lead reform and secure professional resources for schools; inadequacy of programs for limited-English speaking and below-grade level students; and inadequate district accountability for school improvement.

1) Weak Rural District Involvement in School Reform

Compared to most of their urban counterparts, schools in rural districts stood out as receiving minimal district assistance and involvement in their school reform efforts. Rural and urban school principals painted very different portraits of their district 's role in establishing direction for reform and in advancing helpful initiatives to lead the process. They also depicted drastically unequal district capacity to assist schools in making improvement. For instance, rural schools in small districts had far more limited availability of professional development and planning opportunities. Urban districts, overseeing many more schools and thereby working with economies of scale, often had separate staff devoted to specialty areas such as curriculum development or data analysis. By contrast, rural districts with a limited tax base tended to have very few staff, often wearing multiple hats. In urban schools, districts also helped schools identify research-based methods for working with at-risk students and they introduced them to whole-school design models. Principals in rural schools had to rely on their own efforts to locate such research and none mentioned even the possibility of adopting a whole-school model. As one rural principal explained it,

"I would say the district has played a minor role in how we've shaped improvement strategies at our school. I think they want to, but our district 's central office is understaffed. The associate superintendent is a great guy, but he's spread so thin. I think the district staff are just really detached from what we're doing in the buildings ....the district gives me support financially when I find an expert to come in and help us train in writing. But it 's not like they brought in this person, it was another principal and myself who did ....I never have felt like the district blocked me. But it 's really hard. We can't wait for the school district to finally adopt a (new curriculum) series. If we would have done that we would have really struggled the last three years."

Rural schools were also crippled by their isolation and remoteness, which further limited their access to professional development opportunities and the local capacity and perspective to make change. Without the ability to pool resources with neigh-

boring districts, rural districts had less leverage to bring in specialists. Principals also faulted the isolation of their communities for a narrow district and staff vision of improvement, due to the insular community and the in-grown perspective of most school board members and teachers.

In many circumstances, rural school principals and teachers also found the district 's contribution to generating momentum and establishing direction for reform to be weak and ineffective. By principal and teacher accounts, it appeared that some districts had remained almost silent on the issue of reform until this past year and seemed to be scrambling to make changes that would "give the impression that something is happening." In these rural schools, some principals criticized long-standing school board members for their unwillingness to change "the way things have always been done" and their lack of support for school reform efforts. In other cases, when districts experienced leadership changes, principals and teachers expressed frustration over the lack of continuity in reform initiatives advanced by the original superintendent. For instance, one principal explained that under the first superintendent, district-wide early release days were established to focus intensively on improving reading and writing instruction, an area all the district principals agreed needed work. With the arrival of the new superintendent, that focus was replaced by a menu of disparate trainings selected upon staff request, despite the topics' lack of direct connection to instruction.

2) Inadequacy of ESL Resources and Strategy
In both rural and urban schools, principals and teachers frequently cited a high concentration of limited-English speaking students in their schools as a barrier to WASL improvement. While some principals in urban schools with 20-plus languages spoken felt enthusiastic that with new instructional approaches, such as ability-level grouping in reading, second-language learners were showing substantial progress on internal reading assessments, that improvement did not amount to proficiency on the WASL. Even with improved skills, these students could not meet a standard that is challenging for even native-English speakers. Rural schools also expressed resentment that their school was considered a "failure" for not bringing Spanish-speaking students to the same standard as English students, when pre- and post- testing on other assessments revealed that their students have indeed made progress. In response to the challenge of bringing limited-English speakers up to standards, some urban and rural schools argued that OSPI must consider additional performance measures for these students to reflect their relative improvement, even when they still cannot reach the standard.

Principals and teachers also faulted inadequate school and district capacity to meet the needs of ESL students as an impediment to improved student learning. In many cases, efforts to make improvement with these students often fell short because the schools and districts had an inadequate number of ESL instructors for the growing population of students with English language needs. Furthermore, almost no regular classroom teachers had been trained in effective methods for working with limited-English speaking students. As one principal explained it,
"We have two ESL aides to work with over a hundred students on a pull-out basis. That 's just simply not enough time and support to get these students to meet the standards in a language that is very new to them ...I can't consider trying a bilingual in-class model because there simply aren 't the bilingual teachers out there."

To make matters worse, most schools cited inadequate facilitation of extended learning opportunities for at-risk children, including second language learners. While almost all schools offered a school-based or district-wide tutoring program targeted at below-grade level students, considerable access barriers kept them from reaching their full potential. Most notably, lack of free transportation to tutoring and summer school programs kept many struggling students from attending the programs they desperately need. Without district-funded bussing, teachers could not mandate attendance for at-risk students and the neediest students often failed to participate because they had unreliable transportation or other challenging family circumstances that prevented them. School leaders and teachers remained unclear about whether failure to provide essential services stemmed from a sheer inadequacy of resources or from district decisions about how to allocate their federal bilingual and migrant funds targeted toward ESL students.

While it is possible that more resources are needed to enhance teacher capacity to work with English-language learners, principals and teachers in some, mainly rural schools could identify little change in their approach to working with these students to help them be more successful. Absent a strategy to target the needs of a group of students that has chronically performed below grade-level, it is not surprising that improvement poses a significant challenge. Schools in our previous studies of fast-improving schools often cited specific strategies aimed at surmounting barriers to student achievement and better meeting student needs. They included a reallocation of existing school resources to better target below-grade level students or a strategy to enhance parent and student accountability for student learning, including restricting student promotion if a student who fell far below grade level had regularly failed to attend class, complete homework assignments, or attend before and after-school sessions focused on areas of academic weakness.

Lastly, principals and teachers regularly decried a lack of research on effective practices with ESL students and considered OSPI's response to this issue lacking. Additionally, many principals expressed sincere concern over the appropriateness of testing these students only in English when they may have developed literacy skills in a different language and when the experience of intensive English testing was very demoralizing for these students. Overall, the issues of English-only testing and the appropriate pace and format of English language instruction for non-English speakers remain deeply divisive and point to the need for further dialogue and direction about how best to serve the needs of all students.

3) Weak district accountability for school improvement

Overall, urban and rural districts represented in the study have exercised fairly weak oversight of school performance and plans for improvement. In light of the rhetoric that Washington has "high stakes accountability", it is important to note that most principals in the slow-improving schools said they had felt little performance pressure directly from their superintendent or school board. In responding to crises in leadership and culture, urban schools encountered some district intervention and incentives to improve, while most rural districts left their schools alone and did little to facilitate their improvement.

Districts exercise little oversight of school improvement

From the depiction of study respondents, most urban and rural districts had exercised a fairly hands-off approach toward monitoring school improvement and invested

little time helping individual schools craft a meaningful strategy or overcome barriers to improvement. Only one urban/suburban district seemed to have an explicit plan of accountability and intervention, manifested by a clear and integrated district response to slow improvement. The response included a thorough diagnosis of school capacities and weaknesses, and a targeted plan of assistance including 1) possible principal replacement 2) the allocation of additional resources for strategic purposes, 3) exemptions from district mandated curricula, and 4) an unwavering district mandate to show improvement, buttressed by close monitoring of school progress. Other districts often required the submission of improvement plans and a more limited number set explicit school performance goals or required detailed action plans to show how the goals would be met. However, most principals described the district as having an expectation that schools would improve but engaging in minimal monitoring of school improvement efforts. In some schools, even when the district had established clear school improvement goals relative to the WASL, school failure to meet those goals elicited no response from the district, so long as the school was demonstrating some improvement.

Rural districts stood out in their lax approach to monitoring school improvement. These two quotes from principals emphasize this condition,
"In this district, it 's like the ITBS, as long as you're 50% or higher you 're fine. For the WASL, if you 're at or above the state average, you're fine. If you 're below the state average, then maybe you might get some heat."

In a more severe instance, the principal explained,
"The district doesn 't really hold us accountable for anything. It 's only really the State, we know the State means business and you better move on that or the State will come in and tell us what to do. If it weren 't for the threat of the State, nothing would be happening at this school."

A couple of principals, both rural and urban, described the district approach as "too loose." One new urban principal explained that the district 's hands-off style is effective for schools with solid leadership and few entrenched barriers. However, the district approach falls apart when a school lacks those elements and the district fails to step in. Another principal explained,
"The district has a random approach. They don't give much direction and they base their policies on what feels good ... When we have done curriculum adoptions, the trainings are voluntary. Even though they get paid a stipend, many teachers won 't go if it 's outside their contract hours. The district doesn't do anything to make them go and without district backing, efforts that I try just get the union on my back."

Urban and rural districts differ in their intervention into high-problem schools
In response to the serious leadership and cultural challenges of many study schools, only urban districts took action to curb the situation, albeit slowly. In the 99-00 school year, some of these urban districts took notice of schools exhibiting little improvement and began to take measures to improve the schools. While this study did not include conversations with superintendents or school board members, it appeared that the primary urban district tactic was the removal of the existing principal and the selection of a new principal. Beyond that, the new principals sensed they had a district "mandate to improve" but received little concrete assistance in diagnosing problems, helping craft a plan, or linking the schools with targeted professional assistance. However, most urban school leaders received dis-

trict support for either the adoption of a whole-school reform model or for additional staff resources to help target chronic problems like low parent involvement and high mobility.

Commonly, urban districts addressed slow improvement by encouraging the adoption of and providing funding for a nationally recognized whole-school reform model. Not surprisingly, the models advocated had well-documented successes meeting the needs of students with similar characteristics to their own --linguistic and cultural diversity, high poverty, and minimal parent involvement. In fact, four of five I-5 corridor schools in this study currently use a nationally known model, such as Success for All or Accelerated Schools. However, some schools had adopted these models in response to chronically low-performance prior to the current education reform movement and not in response to low WASL scores. Where districts had previously provided resources or waivers for schools to adopt these kinds of programs, they resulted in mixed success because, according to principals, some schools failed to implement all the components of the program to their fullest. In some schools, however, the intentionality and clarity of focus that these whole-school programs offer has helped overcome existing barriers to improvement, such as teacher isolationism and the use of disparate and disconnected instructional materials and approaches.

By contrast, most rural districts made no effort to intervene in their schools that were exhibiting slow growth. Respondents at the three rural schools with weak leadership or dysfunctional staff environments expressed frustration that the district did not respond to the needs of the school nor provide the principals leverage to move reform along. They also voiced exasperation that the district would not grant them the power to overcome barriers to improvement. Specifically, where principals discussed the school's reputation for staff resistance, frequent requests from young teachers to leave the school,, and the principal 's inability to get a faction of teachers on board with school reform, the rural district would not grant them permission to make involuntary teacher transfers to dilute the resistance. These principals identified their superintendent and board's relative weakness vis a vis the local teachers union as a barrier to effecting positive change in their school. Interestingly, these principals planned to leave the school at the end of the year and attributed their decision in large part to their lack of hope that things will change.

Many principals remarked upon the necessity of removing obstacles to reform before meaningful change can take hold. The most frequent but by no means exclusive barrier identified was teachers who opposed changes that the majority of other teachers and the principal wanted to make. Urban schools again had more flexibility in resolving conflict with teacher factions who did not support the plan of improvement that the majority of the school community supported. In urban school districts with multiple schools following different approaches to improvement, teachers have more options to leave a school pursuing an unappealing strategy and to move to one that is a better fit with their pedagogical or organizational approach. One urban principal described this built-in flexibility and choice, "Our school had tremendous support for the adoption of this new program. But there were 20-25% of the more established teachers who were not willing to give up on what they were doing, whereas the rest were very eager. We had a lot of hand holding and convincing....and then six transferred because they didn't want to be a part of the program. We told them if they didn 't want to go along with it, they would definitely get

a transfer. The union wasn't opposed to it because there was no reason to be. If teachers wanted it, fine, and if they didn't, they could transfer. The new teaching staff that have since replaced them love it."

In rural schools within small districts, the ability to offer appealing transfers was far from easy and the district provided few opportunities to do so. Two study principals suggested the transfer option to the small block of teachers opposed to implementing block scheduling and reconfiguring professional development time, but the option did not appeal to them. In just the last year, one study principal was able to take advantage of a limited number of involuntary transfers allowed by the district, and she attributed recent progress toward reform to this personnel change. Another rural principal lamented that the seniority and transfer provisions in the district's teacher contract meant that teachers who were not on board with the school's agenda could fill existing vacancies without any input from teachers or the principal. Research on effective schools indeed underscores the importance of "teacher fit" between the teacher's own goals and behavior and school norms as a critical factor in determining school effectiveness (Rosenholtz, 1985).

What Assistance Would Help?

Principals were asked to identify specific types of assistance and policy changes at the state and district level that would help them improve student learning. Many schools noted common barriers and suggestions for assistance. Their suggestions included changes to the format and enhancement of the time available for professional development; increase in the availability of substitute teachers to accommodate professional development needs; better dissemination of best practices for meeting the needs of English-language learners; and the establishment of more high-quality professional development programs in writing instruction. Some other types of assistance were mentioned by mainly rural or urban schools. Lastly, schools expressed both praise and frustration with the format and consistency of state assistance available to help schools develop capacity to raise student achievement.

Universal Assistance Needed

Changes to Format of Professional Development

Principals across all schools consistently mentioned their preference for receiving intensive coaching assistance in their school rather than the current format of large professional development conferences that rarely make a lasting impact. "The building principal is pulled in so many directions; if every school had access to a curriculum specialist, a building coach, or a teacher on special assignment, schools in Washington could fly." Additionally, the few study schools that did receive such intensive assistance found that the external viewpoint lent credibility to their calls for change or lent a fresh perspective on noteworthy barriers to improvement that had gone undiagnosed by staff and principal alike. The clarity and objectivity of the external diagnosis appeared to help the school minimize time they might have spent diagnosing their own needs, especially ones that were so engrained in the school tradition they might be difficult to detect.

One respondent described this pressing need for more effective forms of professional development:

"Professional development is one of the best ways to spend our money and not in the traditional form of staff development. Not in the after-school workshop and forget it, but in some way to have people go into the classroom and work with teachers individually with their kids. To model what good practices are and then help them do that

themselves."

Extension of Time for Professional Development
Another consistently named barrier to improvement was a shortage of time for teachers to develop new skills and modify their instructional approaches while simultaneously maintaining their in-class duties. Not only did principals and teachers explain that the common approach of cramming professional development and planning into an already full teaching schedule could generate only limited effect, they also cautioned about the inevitable teacher burnout that could ensue. Some principals suggested using paid time during the summer for more concerted professional development; however, they were not confident that teachers would agree to this, nor that adequate resources exist to fund a commensurate salary increase.

More Substitute Teachers to Facilitate Professional Development
Almost all schools cited a shortage in substitute teachers as a major impediment to taking advantage of professional development opportunities. While most identified the need for greater collaboration across classrooms in instruction and planning, additional planning time could only be secured by giving teachers release time from class and bringing in substitutes to cover the classrooms. The availability of money to pay substitute teachers was not the issue, but rather the sheer lack of human resources in both rural and urban areas often rendered this approach ineffective. However, some principals also remarked that using substitute teachers presented its own problems, as it detracted from valuable in-class instructional time with teachers and students.

Better Dissemination of Best Practices for English-Language Learners
Respondents frequently expressed a need for more information on effective strategies in the classroom, in the provision of extended learning opportunities, and in the approach to standards-based instruction for English-language learners. For instance, while many principals addressed a need for summer school programs to target below-grade level students, they admitted their uncertainty about the most effective practices to help these students in this context and wished for better research on promising practices. In one or two cases, they praised regional ESDs for beginning to bring that information to the forefront.

Establishment of High Quality Professional Development in Writing Instruction
Many principals found writing instruction to be an area of weakness for their teachers and considered intensive training necessary to develop skills in this area that has been traditionally underprioritized in teacher training programs. They also expressed frustration over the State 's emphasis on Six Traits as the answer to writing improvement. While the program served well as an assessment model, many principals found it lacking as an instructional guide. Surprisingly, among principals who sought better training in writing instruction, a number had recently hired the same writing consultant to help their teachers develop new instructional capacity, a trend which supports principal claims that limited resources for writing instruction currently exist.

Assistance for Rural Schools
Rural principals consistently requested better professional development opportunities. Specifically, multiple principals thought that OSPI should make more professional development funding available to rural schools to compensate for the lack of district resources available. Only one school in our study had received intensive coaching assistance from an ESD, which suggests that these State-funded resource centers may not

be reaching many rural schools that could use their assistance.

Assistance for Urban Schools

While visible in some rural schools, nearly all urban study schools cited high rates of student mobility as a major impediment to their school's improvement on the WASL. While no principal expressed resignation about school-based improvement efforts due to a shifting population, many opted to analyze their score data based solely on multi-year attendees because they did not consider the remaining group's performance to be a valid reflection of the school 's effectiveness. In a few cases, districts plagued by high mobility had instituted some initiatives to curb within district mobility, but these efforts were fairly weak and nonexistent in the vast majority of districts. Overall, schools with high student mobility urged the State to approach accountability for student performance with an eye to this challenge and not penalize schools for the achievement of newly enrolled students.

Research indeed shows that student mobility can be highly detrimental to student learning and the negative impact magnifies with each successive school transfer. Moreover, classroom instruction in schools with high student mobility can suffer as teachers make accommodations for mid-year arrivals and spend time reviewing material (Vail, 1996). While it may be fair to omit the scores of newly enrolled students from a school 's WASL percentages, discounting these students' scores will not address this serious problem most prevalent among high-poverty families. Researchers suggest deliberate district and school policy changes that could curb the negative impact of mobility, such as better communication to parents, introducing mediation offices within schools to help parents resolve housing conflicts with landlords, adopting a district-wide curriculum, or implementing a year-round calendar and flexible attendance and transportation policies.

Mixed record of state responses to school needs

Schools gave a mixed rating to OSPI-sponsored and other forms of state assistance in helping schools navigate the expectations of reform. Many schools favorably credited OSPI with linking them to grant opportunities and providing frameworks from which to plan EALR-aligned instruction. Principals in some rural districts found that recent support they received from the regional ESD or a representative from OSPI helped compensate for a prior lack of district assistance. Beyond helping them target available grants, like the commonly mentioned Comprehensive School Reform Demonstration (CSRD) grant, or helping them diagnose internal obstacles to meeting student needs, these outside resources helped principals gain staff buy-in for improvement. Ironically, despite the present lack of a state accountability plan, many principals also collectively credited the legislature, A-Plus Commission, and OSPI with putting pressure on their school to make changes in the absence of district-driven pressure to do so. In fact, a couple principals attributed their recent success in getting staff to move forward on an improvement plan to the threat of state intervention. One principal explained, "If we didn't get zinged by the state and singled out for this grant, it would be like pulling teeth to get teachers to agree to a plan. But this has given us the impetus and been a catalyst for change."

In part, the State's targeting the school for a special grant or the presence of an ESD coach served as a wake-up call that something needed to happen in these schools. In other cases, principals found the ESD coaching useful in that it provided confirmation from an outside source of their own unpopu-

lar message that things needed work in their school.

"We're working with a coach from the ESD and she coaches us through writing out both a vision and an intentional improvement plan...She helped show us that we've been remiss in being too random ...As the conversations and trust began to build in our staff conversations about curriculum and instruction, the coach as a neutral person was able to point out to the teachers, "well did you hear this, and did you hear that? The person next to me does it this way and I do it a second way --that isn't going to help the kiddos."

Respondents did not universally praise the State's contribution to reform. Consistently, principals expressed frustration over the Legislature's regular modification of the funding streams targeted to professional development and the rules regulating the acceptable uses of that funding. While the addition of new professional development resources was helpful, their inconsistent delivery made it difficult for many principals to implement a continuous plan of professional development. In strategizing about their school reform approach, some principals also sought to identify schools with similar demographics but higher WASL scores so that they could contact similar schools to share ideas and strategies. In doing so, they experienced frustration with the format and usability of school data on OSPI's web site. Some other principals also expressed grave concern over the flavor of the A-Plus Commission's recommendations for school intervention. While they considered accountability essential to reform, they thought it unfair to take a punitive approach to schools serving at-risk students. They did not seem aware that the Commission's recommendations squarely set intervention as an action of last recourse when schools failed to show progress after intensive assistance.

section five:
policy implications

Our interviews provided insight into school reform efforts in slow-improving schools and point to important state, district, and school level policy responses to better address the needs and challenges of these schools.

State Policy Implications
The following recommendations incorporate the findings about slow-improving schools that bear directly on the debate over the terms of Washington's plan for holding schools accountable for student learning.

1. Assistance and intervention must reflect some diagnosis of an individual school 's needs.
This study revealed that slow-improving schools face a diversity of barriers to improvement and vary considerably in their resources and capacity to alleviate barriers and craft and implement a plan of improvement. Since all schools do not face the same barriers to improvement, they would not likely benefit from the same types of assistance or require the same degree of intervention from an external body. As such, it is imperative that any state action of assistance or intervention be based on a thorough observation and diagnosis of a school 's problem, so that a blunt one-size-fits-all solution does not attempt to rectify a varied and complex situation.

2. External assistance is necessary to help some schools improve
As the debate continues over the appropriate state response to struggling schools, conversations with principals reveal that districts and schools alone do not or cannot always address their range of needs without outside assistance. In many cases, districts were unable to serve as a valuable resource for schools and failed to provide strong leadership on school reform efforts, leaving principals and teachers to assume the burden with little guidance or support.
For many schools, teaching to standards involves radical departures – abandonment of their traditional approach to instruction, the content of their curriculum, and their norms of teacher isolation and individualism. Such change comes hard and targeted assistance to help advance that change and introduce or reinforce best practices would go a long way toward moving some schools in the right direction.

Some struggling schools might benefit from receiving from an external coach or assistance team that would help diagnose areas of need, call attention to the weaknesses of existing instructional or organizational strategies, and help craft an integrated plan of improvement. For other struggling schools, a corps of master teacher coaches might be dispensed to work with the school 's teachers on the implementation of effective instructional strategies and on using data more effectively to tailor instruction. The funding for such assistance might be provided solely through OSPI, through a combination of state and district funds, or through some other arrangement that reflects shared responsibility for student learning.

3. Intervention, reconstitution, and new options for students may be necessary in some schools.
The study findings reveal that some schools may stagnate as a result of an environment and culture overwhelmed by anger and distrust and where negativity and resistance have eclipsed the school 's essential function to educate all children. State policymakers must consider whether an infected school culture may prevent some schools from benefiting from targeted assistance. In schools where an external diagnosis reveals an organizational problem, such as a toxic school culture, the State body that oversees accountability must be prepared to intervene. Such intervention might include intensive mediation to improve soured adult relationships in the school with a shorter timeline attached to the process. If this form of intervention should fail to lessen the hostility and replace it with student-oriented norms of conduct, the school must be considered a candidate for reconstitution, a process including the hiring of new teachers and leadership who are trained together to

provide a coherent instructional program. During the mediation and reconstitution stage, it is possible that the school 's students would require a waiver to attend another school or would need to receive instruction from an emergency staff brought in to remedy the effects on student learning of the prior school 's dysfunction.

A slow-improving rural school that is the only school in a community poses a special problem for the development of plans for assistance and intervention. Students at such a school have no options available for a better education, and rural principals and districts face limited options for intervention given the small teaching pool in their community and the inability to transfer teachers to other schools. This situation almost certainly demands state intervention, including such measures as incentives for new people to move there and teach.

5. The State must hold schools and districts accountable for performance.
The study findings reveal that district and parent levers for promoting school performance lack the necessary strength to ensure school accountability for student performance. Some districts have not developed meaningful approaches to performance accountability or cannot garner the strength to hold schools to challenging standards in a small community with few options. Furthermore, parents in the study schools showed no evidence of imposing "accountability by foot", whereby the threat that they will transfer their child from an unsatisfactory school creates pressure for the school to improve performance. Parents in rural and poor urban communities may not have the option to exit a school, because the area offers few educational choices, district enrollment policies restrict their choices, or their economic and personal situation overwhelm their ability to make the best educational choices for their children.

In light of the debate over whether accountability pressure and action should stem from the local community alone, the evidence of weak local accountability underscores the need for state intervention. Indeed, many principals and teachers perceive the threat of state intervention as the only source of pressure that has the force to promote real school change. Moreover, in the absence of district support, some principals welcome state intervention as the leverage they need to make reform happen. Nevertheless, the jury is still out in the minds of some schools about whether "this too shall pass."

State policymakers must own up to their ultimate responsibility to guarantee a high-quality education to every child in this state. The development of academic standards and assessments have created a strong foundation for improving education. Holding schools accountable for performance is also an essential part of that promise. Policymakers cannot back down from creating real pressure to improve and following it up with the assistance and intervention that is desperately needed in so many struggling schools.

5. OSPI must provide better leadership on meeting the needs of English-language learners
Many schools find themselves at a loss to mount effective strategies for meeting the needs of English language learners. When they look for sources of guidance, they often perceive OSPI as turning a deaf ear to their concerns. As one teacher put it, "OSPI has so far ignored the students who are most in need." Across the country, the dilemma of meeting the academic needs of non-English speakers looms large in the education debate. OSPI and the ESDs must provide guidance and support to the schools and teachers working with students of various backgrounds.

6. OSPI and the State Board of Education must take an active role in re-examining the training provided to principals, superintendents, and school board members
An organization's effectiveness hinges upon strong leadership. In the absence of people with the appropriate training and experience

to tackle the challenges of educating our youth in an era of major reform, the hope for Washington schools is dim. Beyond the expertise needed to manage and lead effectively, real leadership demands the leverage to make the tough decisions necessary to move an organization toward its goals. The current configuration of authority within districts and schools and the preparation offered to those who assume leadership roles may not be adequate to move a struggling educational system to improvement. Given the crucial role of leadership, the State must work collaboratively with the higher education and foundation communities to rethink existing paths of preparation.

District Policy Implications
The findings on slow-improving schools also point to the district 's responsibility for providing support to schools, monitoring their improvement, and creating policies that best meet the needs of their students.

1. School Boards and Superintendents must provide the support and leverage schools need to make change.
Schools rely on district support and guidance to effectively serve their students. Frequent changes in district leadership, micromanagement by the school board, and an unwillingness to alleviate a school 's cultural, personnel, and leadership barriers thwart the effectiveness of our public schools. Principals cannot lead ambitious school change without district support. if districts will not support the necessary measures to make that accountability real. If principals cannot make appropriate personnel changes when a teacher is resistant or unwilling to abide by the norms of the school, school leadership will be forever undermined. Likewise, if districts do not hold principals to standards of performance and leadership in the schools they run, teachers will continue to harbor resentment against ineffective leaders and an unresponsive district and the students in that school will pay the ultimate consequence. With principal and teacher accountability must come the appropriate freedom to carry out the duties of school leadership and classroom teaching and the necessary professional resources to make that happen.

2. District leaders must explore opportunities to use time differently
Professional development - Principals and teachers alike recognize the limited time available to make major improvements to instruction while the demands of the classroom remain. The summer months provide the obvious answer to that time crunch, and this option must be considered as a viable proposal for addressing this barrier.
School Calendar - Meeting the needs of students, particularly those with diverse language needs, might best be accomplished under a very different service delivery model. Year-round schooling or other variations of the traditional calendar must be explored as possible solutions to meeting the learning needs of a growing non-English speaking student body.

School Policy Implications
Teachers and principals can both take away meaningful lessons from this study 's findings.

1. Principals must fulfill their responsibility of reinforcing the school 's vision for reform
Principals in this study are working in an environment of changing expectations, increased scrutiny, and growing challenges. Their leadership and approach to improving their schools are critical to making lasting reform. Principals must make sure their school has a clear vision and strategy for improvement, everyone follows it, and nothing deflects the school from it.

2. Teachers and Principals must help confront unwillingness to change.
The changes that are occurring in public education today can feel frightening and uncertain. While it is important to be critical and thoughtful about reform adoption in our schools, resistance to change serves no one and hinders the opportunity to improve the practice of teaching and the organization of a school's structure, time, and resources so

that it best meets student needs.

3. Consensus-building cannot be allowed to impede necessary reform. Collaborative decision-making can be an effective empowerment tool, a useful way to ensure appropriate consideration of the various factors relevant to school policy and practice decisions, and a means to ensure full buy-in for decisions that affect an organization. However, when the process degenerates into a mandate for absolute consensus it poses the risk of moving incredibly slowly and can delay the essential advancement of reform strategies that must take hold to better serve children.

conclusion:

Conclusion

This study demonstrates characteristics of elementary schools in Washington that struggle to make improvement. In doing so, it makes a case for including certain features in Washington's school accountability plan. Most importantly, the State 's plan must require a thorough diagnosis of school needs before any further action, whether assistance, opportunities for teacher training, or bolder steps like reconstitution, be taken. After such a diagnosis, the terms of assistance and intervention should be tailored to address the specific needs identified in this assessment. It is clear from the study findings that many schools that struggle to improve would likely benefit from targeted assistance that helps them focus their plan of improvement and implement necessary changes to instruction. However, the study also revealed that some struggling schools may have such deeply ingrained organizational and cultural problems that they would be immune to targeted assistance without first addressing their organizational dysfunction. For some schools, intervention and reconstitution of the entire staff and leadership might be the only effective approach.

District and school actors can also take lessons from this study 's findings in terms of their own approach to school improvement. As the study demonstrated, targeted external resources, guidance, and pressure from the district can make a major difference in the path a school follows and the success it has in improving student learning. Furthermore, lack of district intervention into a slow-improving school or an unwillingness to remove barriers that stand in the way of school change can cripple school reform initiatives. Likewise, within a school, the process by which reform decisions are made and the priority attached to student learning can make the difference between a slow and disintegrated plan of improvement and one that includes an integrated array of necessary changes, determined at a pace that acknowledges the urgency of improving student learning.

appendix A:
methodology

Appendix A

Methodology
I selected schools for this study based on the rate of change in their WASL scores between 1997, the first year of voluntary WASL administration, and 2000, the latest year of scores available. I chose schools whose rates of change in BOTH math and reading landed them in the lowest 12-30% of schools with similar baseline scores. Many schools made good progress in one area but not the other. These schools were not included.

From the census of elementary schools in WA State with four successive years of WASL scores, I assigned each school to a baseline category based upon their scores in Reading and Math on the 1997 pilot 4th grade WASL. A separate set of categories was created for Math and Reading.
For math, categories A-D represented the following ranges of baseline scores:
A: 0-10 % met standard
B: 11-20 % met standard
C: 21-30% met standard
D: 31-55% met standard

For Reading, categories A-D represented the following ranges of baseline scores:
A: 0-20% met standard
B: 21-35% met standard
C: 36-50% met standard
D: 51-65% met standard

Within each category of schools, I then calculated the mean percentage improvement between 1997 and 2000. I identified schools as "slow improving" if their rates of improvement fell within the lowest 12-30% of improvement rates for that group of schools within their same baseline category. The selection criteria for reading was stricter than for math. Schools were screened based on their reading improvement. Only schools with improvement rates that rendered them in the lowest 12% of the schools in their category were considered for inclusion in the study. Of those schools, I considered only the ones that also exhibited math improvement that fell in the lowest 30% of schools like them. It is important to note that in many cases, particularly those schools whose baseline scores fell in the lowest categories, the average rate of improvement to which they were compared was quite high. Therefore, falling into the lowest 12-30% of the schools within that category does not necessarily mean that a school showed no improvement.

Only 70 schools of roughly 800 fell into the lowest improvement categories for both math and reading. Of the seventy schools, I chose 31 schools that I contacted by letter and phone to request their participation in a one-hour telephone interview. The 31 schools I sampled were selected with an effort to choose schools that represented the geographic and socioeconomic diversity of WA elementary schools. Just over half of those schools agreed to have the principal or lead classroom teacher participate in an interview. A few schools declined to participate and the remainder did not respond to repeated attempts to contact them.

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